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Viewing cable 09PARIS1416, MARCH 2010 REGIONAL ELECTIONS PREVIEW SARKOZY'S

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09PARIS1416	2009-10-21 15:09	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001416

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SUBJECT: MARCH 2010 REGIONAL ELECTIONS PREVIEW SARKOZY'S
STRENGTH AT MID-TERM

Classified By: POL M/C Kathy Allegrone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: French regional elections scheduled for March 2010 are shaping up as a measurement of President Nicolas Sarkozy's strength at the mid-point of his term. Despite rumors of malaise and dogged by a series of internal political tempests including the Clearstream trial, rumors of his Culture Minister's participation in sex tourism, and his

son Jean's appointment to a coveted business position amidst charges of nepotism, no other political figure or party can match the dominance of Sarkozy on the French political scene. The opposition Socialists (PS) are in tatters, with Martine Aubry, as Party Chairman, vying for control of the left against her bitter rival, 2007 PS presidential candidate, Segolene Royale. With Sarkozy's UMP controlling only two of 22 regions, and following their impressive victory in the European elections last June, the center-right appears to have nothing to lose. The debate has been how many more regions will tip their way -- and what will constitute victory. Regional councils play a role in the selection of French Senators, and by extension that body can take on a different complexion than the UMP-controlled National Assembly. As the only national vote before the 2012 presidential and legislative races, all eyes view this round of regional elections as a preview Sarkozy's reelection bid. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Regional elections will be held in France in mid-March 2010 to elect local leadership for the 22 regions of mainland France and four additional overseas regions. In 2005, Socialists overwhelmed the UMP in the regional elections, winning all but two regions. The huge Socialist victory was viewed widely as a repudiation of then-President Chirac's leadership. As the only nationwide elections before the 2012 presidential and legislative elections, "the regionals" are viewed as a referendum on Nicolas Sarkozy's leadership and a snapshot of parties' relative strength heading into 2012.

Mechanics

¶3. (U) As elsewhere in Europe, regional elections in France are a confusing system combining proportional and majority voting. Like other elections in France, voters choose a party list, or slate of candidates, representing various parties. Any list winning 10% of the vote in the first round of elections (likely to be on March 14 or 21, 2010), advances to a second round of elections (one week later, thus either March 21 or 28, 2010). Parties that win only 5% of the vote may join efforts with other parties to advance to the second round. If one party wins 25% of the votes, they win the right to form the regional council; the remaining seats are divided proportionally depending on the results of the second round.

Sarkozy's Dominance, Despite Governing Woes

¶4. (C) Regional councils finance education, transport and other key infrastructure, and are locked in a struggle with national authorities over taxation. They also participate, along with other municipalities, in the selection process of French Senators, and will do so again in September 2011. With only two regions controlled by conservative majorities (in Alsace and Corsica), President Sarkozy would welcome extending his political dominance to regional councils, to match his lionized role in the executive and legislative branches. But Sarkozy faces his own challenges, and the press is abuzz about malaise in his administration, as well as Sarkozy's "monarchical tendencies." Concretely, Sarkozy first urged cabinet members to head the UMP ticket in various regions. He then flipped and decided it was incompatible to hold both jobs simultaneously. That decision forced three ministers to opt out of running in regional races, and has left the President's UMP party ill prepared for March, scrambling to find suitable candidates. Sarkozy has also been dogged by recent scandals, including his Culture Minister Frederic Mitterrand's dalliance in possible sex tourism. Mitterrand chronicled his appetite for paying for sex with young men in a 2005 book (that Sarkozy described as "courageous") but subsequently publicly denied and condemned "sexual tourism," and vigorously denied that any of his actions extended to under-aged youth. Sarkozy has come in for withering criticism when news broke that his 23-year old son, Jean, an undergraduate law student, was to be named head of the regional business authority of France's premier

business district, La Defense. Both the Mitterrand affair and the apparent favoritism enjoyed by the younger Sarkozy have given the president's opponents two potential campaign issues, that could damage his party's chances in the upcoming regionals.

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Weakened Opposition Focused on Infighting

15. (C) Despite the challenges facing Sarkozy, other parties are far from fighting shape. The opposition Socialists (PS) are locked in their own internecine struggle for dominance between party leader, Martine Aubry, and 2007 presidential candidate, Segolene Royal. Sarkozy confidant Alain Minc told Ambassador Rivkin in September, 2009 that he was a close friend of Aubry's whom he had known since their days at France's Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), and that Aubry told him she ran for the PS leadership in order to clip Royal's wings. The PS is preoccupied with how to position the party for the 2012 presidential race, either by forming a broad left coalition, or moving into alliance with the centrist Mouvement Democratique (MoDem) party.

16. (SBU) The PS faces a real challenge from its left, with the Green party hoping to repeat their surprisingly strong showing in European parliamentary elections. The Greens have refused to run with PS in the first round of regional elections and are counting on the growing profile of their 34 year old leader, Cecile Duflot to win in Paris. A Green win in high-profile Paris would be a serious rebuke to the PS, and if repeated elsewhere in France could precipitate Aubry's ouster from her leadership role in the PS.

17. (SBU) MoDem will be challenged by a new group of centrists called Nouveau Centre, which is largely allied with Sarkozy's UMP. Neither party is expected to win any regional contest, but there is an open question of where MoDem will throw its support in a second round of elections. Their electoral results will be watched closely as a barometer for the 2012 presidential race, and whether MoDem will join forces with the PS to create a united coalition to oppose Sarkozy in 2012.

18. (C) The far right National Front (FN) will focus its efforts in the Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur (PACA) region in southern France, a traditional area of support. With his party's finances in tatters and its traditional themes co-opted by Sarkozy's UMP, this race likely represents Jean Marie Le Pen's final campaign. He has passed the torch to his daughter, Marine, who broke the Frederic Mitterrand story, largely to energize her flagging campaign. Fearing association with the FN, other mainstream political parties were slow to criticize Mitterrand, although some PS leaders eventually joined the chorus calling for his resignation.

19. (C) Comment: Although the Mitterrand story has largely disappeared, it has been replaced since by the embarrassing issue of Jean Sarkozy's likely election to head the La Defense business district. Combined, these stories have bolstered the impression that Sarkozy is operating in a zone of monarch-like impunity, and his aides, according to an article in Le Figaro, are unwilling to question the President's views. UMP party leaders have turned to the traditional canard of lashing out at the media for their unfair attention, but they have just as quickly sought to lower expectations for a strong conservative comeback in the March 2010 elections. After losing 13 regions in 2005, UMP election expert Alain Marleix said winning six back was a possibility, but that estimate was lowered by UMP President Xavier Bertrand, who said this week that a center-right win in four would "be a miracle." Regardless of the result, Sarkozy will head into 2012 enjoying an outsized role in the French political firmament -- beloved by some, reviled by others -- and the failure of the opposition to do anything other than bicker amongst themselves spells a positive forecast as Sarkozy eyes are-election bid in two more years.

